Fuelling Change

A case study of the effect of the producer on the UK's performance sector

by Kate McGrath

Intro

I have been working as a producer for 20 years, almost all of which I've spent producing through Fuel, an independent producing company I co-founded in 2004 and lead today. In this research, in the spirit of Sankofa, I'm looking backwards in order to look forwards, reflecting on the development of my practice over those 20 years as a producer, within the context of the evolution of the role as well as changes in the social, political and economic environment during that period. This work is essentially a quest in search of deeper understanding of my role, and how I have developed as a producer over 20 years, through conversations with other producers and artists, and research around the role. I hope that this deep dive might be useful for other producers, and for the sector more widely.

There is relatively little literature around this role, and what literature there is on producing is often practical – handbooks, or interviews on the "in conversation with" model. While we have a good body of critical theory on curating, there is almost zero critical theory on producing. The reasons for this are in themselves interesting: perhaps the nascent and developing nature of this role is one reason, or – reflecting on my own experience – perhaps it is the time-consuming, all-absorbing, hands-on nature of the role which precludes producers from interrogating their practice through critical research and reflection. I was asked to write a book about producing a decade ago, and have only just – purposefully, intentionally, and with great difficulty - carved out the time to commit to this research project. Yet the development of this role has been considerable in my professional lifetime.

In this writing, I explore tendencies, skills and approaches of producing, but one element is constant: producers make things happen. And now, in the context of social, political, economic and environmental challenges unparalleled in my professional lifetime, I believe we need people who make things happen - and, not just that, but vitally, who see what needs to happen, as well as with/for whom, why, when, where, and how. If producers are able to fulfil their full potential, I believe this will enable our cultural landscape to flourish.

Producers make things happen: but what is it about good producing that not only makes things happen – but also makes those things happen well? My enquiry begins with a search for the essence of the role of producer: by considering language(s) associated with the producer, unpacking metaphors and tracking tendencies. I studied English and Modern Languages and often think of

producers as translators between different languages, and of metaphor and imagery in theatre as ways of reaching for a shared language. For that reason, in interviews with producers and artists I've chosen to invite metaphor and imagery to reach to some more essential or shared understanding. I'm also looking at how my own language, values and methodologies have evolved, at the image and language(s) of producing more widely, at what qualities or tendencies producers might have in common, to reach for what the essence of producing might be.

But the producer crucially operates in context not in isolation, so I then look to identify changes in context over this twenty-year period, and how producers and producing have been affected by those shifts. Many producers articulate a desire not just to make projects happen, but to **make change** through their projects, whether that's through development of the artists and participants, individual or collective audience responses, economic impact, social impact or any other legacy of the project. To what extent – and how – do producers make change and shape the context, and to what extent – and how – does context shape a producer, their modes of working, and their impact? In other words, what is the nature of the – productive? – tension between producer and context?

Finally, this research seeks to reflect on how values might function as navigational aids to the producer journeying through constantly shifting contexts, as they have for me, both as a leader and producer. 15 years on from my AHRC Research as the Clore Leadership Theatre Fellow in 2008, I find myself drawn to re-examining the role of the producer as what I term the 'outside eye' in the development of new performance (*Speakeasy: an inside look at the outside eye*, McGrath, 2009). How has my approach to providing dramaturgical support for artistic processes evolved, in relation to the development of our understanding of the role of the producer in this time? I now see this 'outside eye' role in the wider context of a values-led approach to producing, and of the evolution of a producing methodology which encompasses all aspects of the role of the producer. To be an effective producer, you need trust underpinning your collaboration, you need a shared set of values, you need a shared vision – and you need skills in listening (in my case, hugely enhanced by training as a coach) as well as knowledge of this particular artist(s) practice and of the wider craft of theatre/performance-making. Ultimately through an extended period of research of which this report is one part, I'm seeking to imagine what all of this might mean for the future – for me personally, for Fuel, and for the role of the producer.

Context of the research

Since 2004, Fuel has led the field in independent producing in the UK's live performance sector, collaborating with theatre makers, professional and non-professional, audiences and communities, partners and stakeholders, scientists and researchers. During this time the company has negotiated and shaped public perception of how and what producers offer as cultural leaders and as changemakers within the sector, responding to quickly shifting conditions and thinking through complex networks of factors from the socio-political to the ethical, material and pragmatic during any one project.

Given I bring that context to this work, I'm taking a Practice as Research approach which incorporates collaborative working with academics (co- supervisors Dr Molly McPhee and Dr Aoife Monks, Queen Mary's Department of Drama), artists (as collaborators on this research, in particular Khalid Abdalla, Rachel Bagshaw, Inua Ellams, Alan Lane, Pauline Mayers, ESKA), producers who have previously worked at Fuel (also as collaborators on this research, in particular Kathryn Bilyard, Louise Blackwell, Ed Collier, Christina Elliot, Kate Scanlan, Hannah Smith), audiences (as bringers of meaning through surveys), current staff (as co-devisers of methodologies and questions, and in some cases also collaborators on the research, in particular Anthony Gray, Luke Holbrook, Sarah Wilson-White, Angela Bryan-Brown), and partners (as co-producers of impact). The methods involved include:

- archival research: working with Dr Molly McPhee to unearth clues in Fuel's archive as to the evolution of Fuel's values-led approach and producing methodology and examples of this in practice;
- survey: creating and disseminating a pilot survey to ask current and former collaborators (artists, staff, audiences and partners) a series of initial questions about Fuel's impact, including questions about values;
- conversations/interviews: holding a series of conversations/interviews with key collaborators;

- reflection on practice and research findings with research co supervisors Dr Molly McPhee and Dr Aoife Monks, Queen Mary's Department of Drama;
- reading around the area and compiling evidence and references with my co-supervisors' support.

Critically, I undertook a series of interviews over a few weeks with producers and artists all directly linked to Fuel to inform my research into the role and impact of a producer today. I wished to further and deeper than the conventional or received definition, as exemplified in Wikipedia's definition:

> [A] person who oversees all aspects of mounting a theatre production. The producer is responsible for the overall financial and managerial functions of a production or venue, raises or provides financial backing, and hires personnel for creative positions.
> (ref. Wikipedia)

This is echoed and broadened slightly in the Stage One definition:

> The producer is the person that "puts on the show". A theatre producer oversees all aspects of a theatre production, from the generation of an idea to the day-to-day management when it is on stage. They are the person responsible for the financial, strategic and managerial aspects of staging the production. (Stage One)

From my perspective, there's nothing untrue about the Wikipedia definition – or indeed wrong with a commercial approach to producing theatre – and the Stage One definition is broad enough to encompass any production, which is useful, but I'm interested in social and political change through art and creativity, not simply or even primarily financial return. My task is to seek out the essence of producing – beyond this corporate understanding, arguably driven by a capitalist mindset. As a producer, I have chosen to work primarily within the subsidised sector – and when I work commercially, I carry the same consistent values into that model. The concept of 'value' in my practice is strongly oriented towards a meaning of the word as aligned to social and political change, positive impact on individuals involved and crucially on what I see as the extraordinary diversity and ultimate connectedness of our collective humanity – differing quite wildly from concepts of value within capitalist modelling. Similarly, when I talk about 'values' in my practice, the term is aligned to explicitly or implicitly anti-capitalist ethics or principles.

But just as the terms 'value' and 'values' are multi-dimensional, changing, and

carry many histories within them, so are those 'values' themselves: abstract terms such as trust, collaboration, care, sustainability, representation, collaboration, creativity, learning. And so in this quest, I find myself inviting metaphor and imagery to get closer to what I believe what values are for a producer in a material way, through charting some of the deep terrains of the producer: what the essential qualities or psychological makeup of a producer might be.

Trust me, I'm a producer

Amongst the array of roles that the independent producer takes, central to my own interests is how the producer supports artists, across multiple projects. I believe this starts with one of my – and Fuel's – core values: trust. I have always believed trust to be key to relationships which are fulfilling and enjoyable as well as productive and successful, in life and in work. Trust is one of Fuel's core values, and we talk often about what it means, how to build and sustain it, what threatens it, and what can make it stronger. In Fuel's current Business Plan, we've defined it as "the foundation on which people take risks and collaborate productively." (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7).

Back in 2010 when I published my Clore Leadership Fellowship research (funded by AHRC) under the title 'Speakeasy: an inside look at the outside eye' (McGrath, 2009), it included a direct description of this from director Melly Still:

> What benefits the relationship between a director and a producer? Hunger for the producer's feedback. A shared objective, if not vision. A willingness to open your head and heart, even if you don't feel like it, to difficult notes. It helps enormously if there is trust. **Establishing trust is key.**

Trust came up often in my more recent research too, with interviewees talking about "understanding" and "empathy" through "interdependent" relationships, "conversation". Sometimes this was described as

"companionship" and working "together", and there was also an idea of the producer as "psychologist" which speaks to and recognises the particular role the producer has in leading the process of building trust. One cornerstone of this, articulated in Fuel's Business Plan and also in an interview with Louise Blackwell, co-founder of Fuel, is about the effort and work required: "we work hard to build trust by delivering on our promises" (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7), or as Louise puts it to "do what you say you're going to do."

I'm interested in the construction metaphor around trust: *building*, *foundation*, *cornerstone*. This metaphor speaks to the effort involved, and the stability of the result, but we also do well to remember that buildings – like trust – require constant and careful maintenance. Trust is not something we build and then forget about, but something we have a duty of care to maintain. Like the famous Forth Rail Bridge joining the central belt of Edinburgh to Fife and the Highlands beyond, we have to keep repainting it for, if we don't, the weather insists on creeping in to erode any exposed metal below.

There is, of course, another metaphor at play with trust: that of earning and giving, or of "holding in trust" - but the *cost* of trust here is a cost counted not in pounds and pence but, as the construction metaphor also suggests, in time and effort.

We need trusting relationships to produce our best work – many corporate management studies such as Amy C. Edmondson's *The Fearless Organization* cite the success of companies like Barry-Wehmiller whose CEO Bob Chapman extols the rewards of creating an environment of trust amongst team members. As Edmondson describes: "He learned that trust...was key." (The Fearless Organization, Edmondson, p121). But are there any reasons in particular why artists need to trust producers?

SuperProducer

The clue might be in another family of terms to arise in interviews. Both artists and producers speak of a need for "armour" or "security" to "protect" processes and ideas which are "fragile". The producer role is to be "strong", to "warn" against danger, to work "carefully". This language describes the vulnerability of an artist and the delicacy and instability of their emerging idea, with the producer visualised as a tough shield or layer of defence around them. The coat of armour or shield which the producer provides must be strong for the artist to feel secure. Artists and producers alike acknowledge the artist needs to be able to **trust** that the producer will protect them in order for them to feel able to take creative risks. Recognising this role of producer as protector, Fuel's Head of Programme Anthony Gray describes the producer as a "helmet" to protect the artist, and recognises both the negative and the positive sides to this:

> Back in those old school movies, like wartime movies and those soldiers are wearing those metal helmets, which probably did nothing at all but created that sense of such security that it meant that people would just run into a battlefield. I think that's what producing is for me. It's that sense of being able to give an artist or a creative so much security that they can kind of just jump into the abyss without fear. And, and if they fail or if, you know, a bullet hits the helmet, it'll just bounce off them. And I think that's what a producer is. Yeah, I am the helmet.

Poet and playwright Inua Ellams describes his need for this kind of protection both viscerally and playfully by comparing a producer to Iron Man's suit:

> Iron Man's suit. It's a suit of armour. It is a highly effective CPU – Central Processing Unit. It makes calculations automatically. So it protects Tony Stark from all weathers. It pilots him, it chills him, it guides his missiles. So he can just be the soul in the machine, making the moral and ethical decisions, figuring out who to save and how to save them well, and the suit does the logistics stuff for him. It makes the man immortal. The Ironman suit also has an artificial intelligence called Jarvis, and it acts like a companion to Tony Stark, but it very much also automates and just does things that Tony Stark doesn't need to think about because he trusts that he's there. So, for me it speaks to companionship and to trust and to a togetherness of suffering. And by that I mean, when Tony Stark is being battered, so is the suit and the suit tries to protect both of them. It means that they go on long, epic journeys together. They survive together, they remember things together. They pull each other up. They warn each other away from things, you know? I think that's what a good producer feels like. It isn't protection because that can be a cold relationship. It's more intuitive and interdependent than that.

This comparison starts with the producer as a physical line of defence against missiles (threats to the artist's fragile idea and/or confidence?) and weathers (the dangers of the environment – in the widest meaning of the word - in which the artist is trying to create?). The image of producer as protective suit speaks to me of boundaries: clothing, and skin, are boundaries between inside and outside, and here the artist is describing how the producer embodies - or provides - boundaries for an artistic process. Inua then moves to an image of the producer as an automaton or machine delivering logistics. Recognising this might feel "cold", Inua goes on to qualify or clarify that the suit is a "companion" to Tony Stark, that they experience suffering, battering, long epic journeys, survival and memory *together*. In this image, the artist is Tony Stark, the human "soul", and the producer is Jarvis, the AI companion and protector. They are not the same – but they are interdependent. Trust here is aligned with companionship, with shared experiences, with shared memories - above all with *time*. Trust is not immediate but accumulated.

Hold Me

This image of producer as shield morphs into a more peaceful image in the idea of the producer as vessel: producer Christina Elliot describes the producer as a "basket":

> I think it would be some sort of container, maybe a basket or maybe a bowl. It would represent something about holding together. I think it would somehow represent how you can bring quite disparate people's influences, contexts, together. And it's the alchemy of how those things then are in relation to each other which is the moment of experience of an audience in connection with the work.
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> It makes me think of those analogies that they sometimes use, probably now very dated, but I learned at school about - is America a melting pot - but maybe I like the analogy of a basket rather than some sort of soup because I think those elements are all still distinguishable. I mean I would say that the producer somehow brings those elements together, but I don't transform them on my own. I feel like the artists are the magicians, you know, the cooks. But I do feel like there's a kind of gathering that I do in producing.

I'll talk more about the idea of producers as magicians or cooks later, but for now I'm interested in the idea of the producer bringing elements together, or "gathering" as a vessel or basket – like the helmet, it feels like a safe space, but it's also more porous and the metaphor speaks more to ideas of harvesting or nourishment than to images of defense and war. This idea of bringing together is echoed by Fuel's Senior Producer Sarah Wilson-White comparing a producer to a "spool of thread, binding people together". I love the connotations of this image too – of creating something new, of bringing different fabrics together, of mending, of detailed handiwork.

The image of the producer as gathering and *holding* is echoed in producer Kathryn Bilyard's metaphor of the producer as an "origami box":

> I think maybe it would be some sort of magic origami box or thing that can hold stuff, but that can change shape and it's flexible but strong. Maybe it's just Mary Poppins' bag!
>
> If you can support a project properly, so you get enough team members in place with the right experience, get the funding that means that it has enough time and budget to be what it wants to be, find the right partners for it that are going to really invest in it and make it flourish and find the right space for that to happen, effectively what you are doing as a producer is sort of **holding** that and giving it some sort of shape, holding all of those bits, trying to not let any of them drop. And as the project develops, moulding and changing that shape. You've set enough in place that you can follow the creatives in what they're doing so that your work shifts around that and is always following the ultimate end game of what the work that needs to be.
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> I was thinking about origami. So that, you know, it's beautifully folded and you're like, it's perfect, and then it changes, and you have to unfold a bit of it and fold it back up into a different shape. So that it still works, but it's always beautiful.

In this rich articulation of the balance between *holding* and moulding, of *support* and also *shift*, Kathryn is – perhaps sub-consciously – describing one of the great paradoxes at the heart of good producing: the combination of solidity and flexibility. Yes, the producer holds, and also, the producer holds in a way that allows for change. Kathryn's paper which is unfolded and refolded is being recycled and re-used in a different form - there is no waste, or damage, no rips or tears, but rather there is a care and a delicacy with which the producer reshapes to hold the artist or the idea.

Also encapsulated within the idea of "holding" is the inference that the producer does not "drop" the artist or idea. One of the ways in which I have sought to build trust is for artists I work with to know that we are committing to their idea from the moment we say "yes" to it, throughout its journey, whatever that may be. Many organisations, particularly venues, take a phase-by-phase approach to this: supporting a workshop, or a first draft, and then judging the work through a review of that first draft, or attendance at a (sometimes therefore highly pressured) sharing, as a consequence of which they will either commit to a next phase or "let the project go" or "pass on it". Whilst the reasons for this are many and sometimes positive (e.g. it enables them to support more artists at early stages, who can then continue with any developed work which is not taken forward by the original venue with a new one), I find it creates a hierarchy as the power to decide whether or how the project will be further developed lies with the venue. By committing to the artist and their idea to its natural conclusion, we build trust and travel *together* with the artists.

One of the consequences of this is that projects can change really dramatically on that journey, and yet we are all still there. We are holding the essence of the idea with the artist and working together to find its best form or articulation, the best context for it, and so forth. The idea might start out as a play and turn out to be a book or a film, it might start out as a solo work and end up as an ensemble piece, it might initially seem to be about one theme and become more about something else. As a building-free producer, a phrase we use often, we do not start with a pre-conceived destination for the work we produce, in bricks and mortar, in physical relationship to an audience, in a particular geographic location or community. Instead, we are "free" to commit to the idea and follow it where it takes us, we can change shape, as Kathryn describes unfolding the origami box and folding it up differently.

In practice this might mean working differently ourselves, drawing on different past experience or networks, and/or bringing different partners or freelancers on board to collaborate, depending on the skills and connections needed as the form of the work evolves. I believe it is this flexibility and adaptability which enabled us to thrive creatively during the pandemic. A project originally intended to happen live outdoors was reimagined to be experienced live over the phone (*Signal Fires*, 2020); an outdoor performance became a film (*The Kids Are Alright*, 2020); a project was delivered to its audience by post (*Thirst Trap*, 2021); another was created in eight locations, local to each artist, across the country when travel wasn't possible (*The Litten Trees*, 2021).

I am reminded of a conversation with a colleague who ran a development centre and asked what our "conversion rate" was – meaning how many projects in development did we produce as fully realised projects. I was confused by the question and said I thought it was probably 100% unless the artist decided along the way that they didn't want to pursue the project anymore. My colleague found this surprising, taking pride in their low "conversion rate" as a sign, I think, of having a high bar which ideas/artists had to leap over in order to be taken forwards. My colleague seemed to be offering an alternative model of boundary: less protective barrier, more gatekeeper - in other words, more border than boundary. For me, perhaps, this is where the primary focus of a building as providing a programme for its audiences differs from the ways in which we can work as building-free producers, to follow ideas – whether they come from artists or from communities – until we discover what they become, together. We can hold the idea lightly, like Christina's basket, or Kathryn's origami box, and reshape to hold it in a different way, if that's what it needs.

Active Filtration

Meanwhile, director Rachel Bagshaw develops Christina's image of "gathering" and Kathryn's "holding all of those bits" and sees the producer as a "sieve" or more specifically "gold panning pan":

> I'm going to go with my instinct, and say a very, very, very, finely meshed sieve, that has structure. So, it sort of has boundaries and edges and parameters to it and holds the work. Holds it really carefully and with flexibility, but also enables within that to sift through, I suppose partly dramaturgically. So in terms of the form and the content and the detail of the work to really hold that and sift the work and allow the work to drop out the things that don't need to be.
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> It's more like a gold panning pan that allows the silt to fall through and the gold to stay in the work. It feels too passive as an object, so I'm sort of going to give it animation and make it really engaged with the work. It's *really actively* doing what I've just described. I think it holds it, but also allows an active process of filtration.
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> I guess what, what is important about producing and producers is an ability to be multiple things to artists: to both hold and lead processes, to allow space for processes to shift and change, to support, and also flex with the work, to be responsive and proactive, and to listen and respond.

The producer needs to “contain”, or to “hold”, to “carry”, to “support”, and does so by “gathering” and providing “structure” in the form of “boundaries”, “edges” and/or “parameters”. The producer is working “actively” in a process of “filtration” – and this curatorial or dramaturgical process in Rachel’s description is what separates the “silt” from the “gold”. I love this image not only because it describes the structure and flexibility in one image, but also because it speaks to the skill involved in gently separating out “the things that don’t need to be” in order to create space for the precious “gold” in the work.

There is, of course, safety and security not only in the protective shield or armour, but in the clarity created by a defined “space” within which the artist can take risks. The producer is described by Rachel as “allowing” and “enabling” within that space, as well as “following the ideas”. Artist Pauline Mayers’ description of the essence of producing as akin to the “Russian doll effect” echoes this collaborative process with a producer:

> I’m going to call it a Russian doll effect. You have one idea and then you open up the Russian doll, and you put that bit aside. You’re like, oh, there’s another thing here, and have you thought about this? It’s like, oh, well no I haven’t, and you might go away and have a bit of reflection time, or you might think, oh no, I have thought about that, and I know I have thought about that because of this. And then you open up that little doll and so it just keeps going until you get right down to the central core of the idea or the, yeah, why? The why, the how, the who is it for?
>
> The beauty of the Russian doll effect is you start with this huge great big hotbed of ideas and they are massive. But as you reveal the next doll, you start to hone in on what’s important. As you complete one Russian doll, you put it aside and you leave it there and you keep unpacking and you think, oh, I want to go back to the one, that one that I just unpicked several stages back just to make sure of what that is and how that relates to this new kind of Russian doll. It’s almost like an ancestral line between the original idea and what the actuality, the reality of that could be.
>
> When I say Russian doll, I’m imagining something very beautiful, and each doll has a very distinct look and a very distinct feel. And I think as you burrow down into the nub of an idea and what that is and what that feels like, if it’s the right kind of conversation, that doll in the heart of it is the most amazing, beautiful, fragile thing that then has to be nurtured in order for it to reach its fullest potential. And I think that’s where the producing support really properly kicks in.

One of the aspects of producing which Pauline is describing here is the deep knowledge of the work which a good producer has. Through sitting with the artist as each version or redraft of the work reveals another version, the attentive producer is familiar with the multiple bodies of the play each living inside the play. Although those *drafts* seem to be ultimately invisible to an audience who experience only the final version, they are there within it, and they make it what it is.

Returning to the idea of *values*, this deep knowledge seems to speak to trust again. For me, there is something about proximity or *familiarity* with an artist, with their ideas, with their process, in this expression of a good artist-producer relationship. In building trust over time through companionship and shared experience, both good and bad, we become, in some professional sense, *family*.

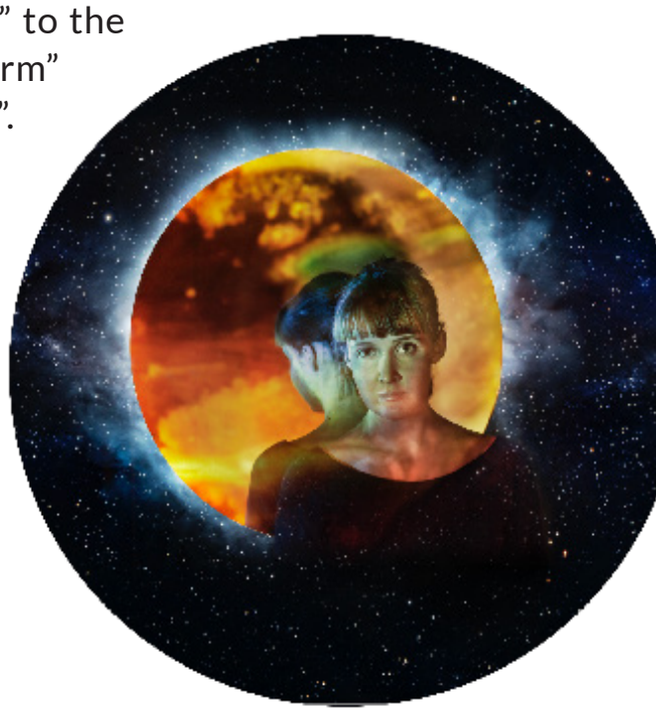
Play, Parenting, Prosthetics

As well as getting deeper or closer to the heart of the matter, there's a metaphor of play in the idea of unpacking the dolls. The link between 'playing' and 'plays', between creativity and playfulness, between artists and children, is a well-trodden metaphor. So too is the related language of "nurturing" artists – language which my team at Fuel will tell you I often reject because of its maternal and gendered connotations which seem to me to be counter-productive in the pursuit of a relationship between artist and producer which recognises equal but different responsibilities lie with both parties. But there is a useful metaphor in actor Khalid Abdalla's reflections, comparing producers to parents, which sees producers as "gardeners", ensuring that the right conditions – soil, water, light – are available to the artist in this held space:

> Some of the best parenting advice I was ever given is that good parenting is more akin to gardening than it is to carpentry. It's not about a saw and a hammer and whatever tools you get out of the toolbox to kind of wrench and sand the person into what? It's about kind of understanding what soil they need, what water, what sunlight and how best to nurture that way.

All of this "holding" could feel quite passive, but for two reflections: firstly, that holding a secure and clear space for an artist clearly requires considerable effort, like gardening, and secondly,

that the role doesn't stop with the creation of the space and the setting of parameters. The producer is also "curious" and needs to "explore" in this process too. The role is "active", even "proactive" – producers are "animated" and "engaged". They "pilot" and they "lead". Their work is not simply to "hold" but to "unpack", to "filter", to "hone in" on "the nub" of the idea.
They are "guides" who "shape", "layer" and "add" to the work: they "shift" it, "change" it, even "transform" or "complete" it through their own "creativity". Here, Khalid's description of the producer as a prosthetic limb creates an extraordinary image of the transformative impact of the producer on an artist's form and mobility:



> From a creative point of view, I think of it more as like a prosthetic, you know, like I'm lacking limbs, or I am not complete with my body as it is. So, I would say that it's more about completing or adding to my body, along the lines of what the project needs and requires. So that, I don't know, maybe I become some arachnid, some other kind of animal that the project requires.

There is something in the visceral and physical nature of this image which is profoundly intimate – the producer as prosthetic limb completing an artist's body in order to enable them to create the project suggests even greater proximity, intimacy or interdependency than the image of Iron Man's Suit – although there is a strong parallel there too.

Gender

A moment here to reflect on gender in these conversations and this imagery. So far, I've found Anthony, Inua and Khalid talking in terms of helmets, body armour and prosthetic limbs, with Christina, Kathryn and Rachel talking about baskets, paper boxes and sieves – with Sarah talking about sewing and Pauline talking about dolls. My future research will explore these areas in greater but for now perhaps to note that as a producer working with all these artists and other producers, I am necessarily shape-shifting to embody these different objects or metaphors as I work – sometimes in one day – with these very different needs. The constant metamorphosing or transforming keeps me curious and constantly challenged by my work – and just as the process

of metamorphosis requires significant momentum, I find the process of transforming into different types of producer in order to support different artists' needs requires considerable energy.

Fact & processes

How does this extraordinary process happen in reality? Well, it's clear that there is real work to be done here – despite the metaphors, it is "not abstract". For the producer to be "effective" and ensure "it works", there is "detail" and there are "facts", as director Alan Lane describes when I ask what object best describes his ideal producer:

> It's the thing that measures wind. Because there's a point in every show we do outside where someone - sometimes they're the health and safety officer, sometimes they're the council, sometimes the producer, it doesn't really matter - will come along and say, what are you going to do if it's too windy? And then we say, well, if it's too windy, we're going to stop the show. And they go, great. And then later on it'll be windy, and they'll come along and say, it's too windy. And you're like, what do you mean it's too windy? Like, what does that mean to you? That's a subjective word. And the only way you ever get around this is by actually having facts. And that's one of the jobs a producer does: they stand next to a creative process and they know things. And so you measure the wind and you say, when the wind is 23 kilometres an hour, it's too windy. And then we will stop. And it's a blessing from heaven.

In a creative process full of variables and particularly when working in site specific contexts where, for example, the weather becomes one of those variables, Alan looks to the producer for clarity and precision, for facts and decisions. Here is another area where I believe producing and leadership are closely connected: I've sometimes said that I think making decisions, and taking responsibility for them, is one of the most important and misunderstood aspects of leadership.

Those decisions can be made with extensive consultation and in collaboration with others – but make no mistake that they are decisions, they need to be made, and they need to be owned by whoever is making them, individually or as a group. And, as Alan says, the input that informs those decisions is based on the producer needing to "stand next to a creative process" and to "know things".

This image of the pragmatic and organised producer who for Alan is represented by measuring wind speed if reflected by producer Hannah Smith in comparing a producer to a diary:

> Because on a macro level it's about setting strategy over a number of years and scheduling multiple projects and on a micro level it's about sensibly dividing and utilising your time to do a million different things each day - some of which are very short-term and immediate like writing thank you cards for the creative team or finding some emergency rehearsal space, and some of which are super long-term like enquiring about the rights for a book an artist wants to adapt one day. You're constantly zooming in and out, moving from day view to month view to year view.

Every producer I know and work with would recognise this constant shifting of timeframe and zooming in and out of the short- and long-term view, and scheduling time with a practical and strategic brain, as key skills in a good producer.

Cooking

This more literal metaphor of the producer as diary recognises there are "techniques" and "processes" and "mechanisms" for dealing with "logistics" and "problem-solving" across many "elements" or "components" to producing. These can also be imagined as "ingredients" with the producer as "cook" or "chef" combining them into a "recipe" which creates one unique "cake", an image evoked by singer/songwriter ESKA as well as producer Ed Collier:

> The classic thing that we talk about through the Optimist training program [a producer training scheme run by Ed's company China Plate] is the sort of cookery metaphor and how the producer is the chef, and that you are looking at a recipe and essentially that's a budget and you are looking at all your ingredients and the quantities and the timings and the processes and the different cookery techniques in order to achieve different cookery results. So that is a very helpful way of explaining, producing to people who might not have looked at it before.

This image of the producer as chef speaks to the idea of curation: the chef/producer considers who will eat the cake, the occasion/location/event

at which the cake will be served, the time of the day as well as the season and weather, in order to select the recipe, ingredients and processes to bake, decorate and serve the cake. Their reward comes – or at least mine does – when the guests react to the cake. This is the moment when the expertise of the producer, invisible in the kitchen, manifests – hopefully in a delicious outcome, which surprises and delights those gathered together to experience it. This image, connected to a moment of gathering and celebration, is echoed in producer Louise Blackwell's comparison of the producer to a party popper or confetti canon:

> Like a huge, big party popper but the reason that I've chosen that is that the intricate mechanisms that go into making that thing go pop are all part of producing. So, there's so many component parts, and then hopefully, at a point when everyone is ready, you can pull the string and there's a glorious moment of celebration that means that the process has happened: the thing that you wanted to make happen has happened.

Alchemy

The producing process as combining ingredients or components is also described as "alchemy" by Christina Elliot, echoing the title of 'The Producers – Alchemists of the Impossible', a book about the new wave of producers, commissioned jointly by Arts Council England and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, and published in 2007, when Fuel was just three years old, in which the brilliant Marc Boothe writes "Producer feels like a limited definition. If anything, I feel like an alchemist – you start with nothing, just a kernel of an idea, and make something of it." In the same publication, David Jubb writes:

> When asked to make a contribution to this book I thought it best to share some kind of skill or wisdom or even alchemy.

There's a modesty about David's use of the alchemy metaphor – as though there is nothing really to it, and it happens naturally and

somewhat mystically: but I'd argue it's describing a methodology of curation developed over time and requiring both skills and accumulated knowledge – aka expertise.

Interviewees describe producers providing "energy" or "fuel" in an "intuitive" way which creates an "explosion" of "colour", a "beautiful" "celebration". It is "magic" which not only enables the artist to "be seen" but "makes immortal". Without wanting to plagiarise Spiderman, producers have great "power" and, with it, comes great "responsibility".

Juggling

It seems inevitable then that producers are constantly "juggling", that they have many "arms" or "tentacles" as in Kate Scanlan's vivid comparison to Lakshmi, the Hindu god:

> For me, it is the Hindu God. Lakshmi. I think it's the multiple arms and the hands - producing for me is like a massive juggling act.
>
> I've always wanted a brain scan of my brain when I'm in deep producing mode on a big project. You have so much detail in your brain. You have the micro urgent to do, you've got the long term, you've got the medium term. You've got what your artists and your creatives need. You've got the production needs. You've got the venue partners, the funding KPIs, and somehow as a producer you develop this ability to use your brain in this way. And as a freelance producer as well, imagine, you're often juggling 3, 4, 5 projects all with different timescales. And you need to bring your best brain and your best creativity and best problem solving to all of those projects at the same time.
>
> And I think it is absolutely amazing how your brain can work in that way. And so, for me, it's that image that I really hold tight. And when I'm at MOVE IT, running around with four stages, 30,000 audience members and all these classes and 12 studios, somehow in the middle of all of that, it gives you this unbelievable ability to be really serene and calm because you are holding all of these things in a way that you found that works for you. We all have our slightly own quirks that work for our own brain and our characters. It must be quite phenomenal to watch the brain activity. And I wonder, if you're a creative producer like we are, and you are being as creatively resourceful as you are, how do both sides of the brain talk to itself in these moments?

Kate is describing producing as an embodied experience here: not just holding, but also running around and juggling, with the left and right sides

of the producer brain talking to each other, constantly in active dialogue. Picking up on this idea of the producer brain, and also on the idea of juggling with many arms, ESKA describes the producer as mind-map with octopus-like tentacles:

> A really good-looking mind map. When I think of producer or creative producer, it's a page, a very colourful page. Lots of colours, lots of intersections going on, lots of lines all over the place. If I was a mind map of a creative producer, it's just got tentacles going all over the place. Lots of circles that overlap or some that are on their own, but this curious mind map explosion, it would look scattered and completely bonkers to most people: you'd think, what is going on in that brain? There's way too much information overload, but it makes complete sense.
>
> And I think a good creative producer is also a bit of an excellent psychologist, understands psychology, understands the layer cake of the human creative mind in a way, you know? And, they're able to hold all of that and it doesn't look crazy to them. To the mind of a creative producer, there seems to be more of an understanding or empathy to the fact that as human beings, we're not just one thing. You know, the front facing thing, that's all it is, it's just the facade. But behind that, that building is full of lots of rooms and there's lots going on, lots of movement. I think a great producer is able to visit all those rooms and explore and enjoy the exploration, even if it doesn't lead to anywhere, you know, but they have a curiosity about potential in another human being. What if? And how? Which can really transform what an artist does.

Energy

I've got to admit I'm feeling a bit exhausted simply describing this SuperProducer – and that's not surprising because amidst it all they also need to be "serene" and calm". But just as producers recognise the complexity of human beings, producers are also ultimately human, and this is why they also describe the toll of taking on this role, as Anthony Gray does here:

> Sometimes you wear those, those hits with pride, don't you? You are there to support. It feels great because, you know you've had a really huge impact on that creative's work and a lot of the time that artist's life, you know. Creatives really put their all into a work a lot of the time, and if something is going wrong, they take it: it's such a deep internal feeling that they can have sometimes. So yeah, to sometimes take those hits or the arrows or the bullet whizz through the air. You can kind of feel that

> and wear that with pride, but you know, there are times when it takes a lot, it takes a lot to take those hits. It takes a lot of energy, and it can be really shattering and really thankless sometimes. But on the other side, you could build amazing, wonderful relationships with people because hopefully you are there to give them that trust and support that they sometimes might need. It can feel really, really positive a lot of the time, but there are times, you know, I'm not going to lie, when it can be the most draining thing ever and you just need a week to hide in a dark room and be like, Ooh, that was something else.

Perhaps this kind of superhuman effort is always going to be "draining" or more viscerally "shattering", suggesting that it isn't just the artist who feels "fragile" but also the producer. I found it saddening that the role was also described as "invisible" and "thankless" by several producers. As Kathryn Bilyard said:

> It is quite a lot of responsibility I think, to hold as a role, creatively and practically but when it's joyful, I think, or when it's done really, really well, then it's almost kind of invisible. People aren't concentrating on it. They're looking at what's being made as a result of good producing rather than at the producing itself.

This was almost exactly reiterated, word for word, by Hannah Smith of the Wardrobe Ensemble:

> I feel like good producing is **not very noticeable** - it means everything has worked smoothly and without an issue. If you're noticing the way a project has been produced then probably something has gone wrong, which can sometimes make it feel like a thankless task!

And by Fuel's Senior Producer, Sarah Wilson-White:

> The difference good producing makes can be hard to identify, as with good producing it almost becomes invisible - like a swan's feet paddling beneath the serene surface.

In an audience survey, I asked "What difference do you think good producing makes?" and received this response from one audience member:

> Makes the art look effortless to an audience (probably when it has been anything but...).

Artist ESKA reflected:

> Every artist, I think, wants to be seen, wants to be *really* seen, not just for the things that are obvious, but all the other things, all the layers underneath.

Perhaps this could be said for producers too: not necessarily in the public eye, but in ways which are personal to each producer, my instinct would be that these superheroes sometimes need their multiple special powers to be really seen in all their superhuman complexity.

In 2014 when Fuel celebrated its 10th birthday, we commissioned photographer Manuel Vason to create a series of portraits of a range of people connected to Fuel: artists, staff, partners, even audience members. Manuel asked them to bring "an object which spoke of their relationship to Fuel". Clara Giraud, once an intern at Fuel now in Projects and Policy for the Mayor of London's Culture team alongside independent producing, wore "a shiny protective suit, to take the blows, and moonboots, to keep me grounded!" David Jubb, then Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre, now an independent producer, described Fuel as "outlaws who work inside and outside the system". Inua Ellams wrote of his "hope for Flight" and created an image of himself flying with wings, and Lilli Geissendorfer, then General Manager at the Almeida and a Fuel Catalyst, and now a Fuel trustee, rode a bicycle and wore a flowing cape, writing that Fuel "enables imaginations to fly".

So, yes, my object to capture the essence of producing would be a superhero's cape which gives the wearer many special attributes:

to earn trust,
to tend the soil,
to listen and speak with care,
to shield, to hold,
to sift for gold,
to journey and explore together,
to shape-shift,
to uplift.

But it also occurs to me that it is actually one of SuperProducer's powers to be invisible some of the time, as well as – like all superheroes – to transform back into their human form in their day-to-day lives.

Unique or universal?

Reflecting on gathered observations about the essence of the producer role, I find myself considering whether any of the qualities, or the combination of qualities, is unique to the role of a producer of live performance, or if we could be talking about a similar role in any other industry. Are we doing something fundamentally unique or is it fundamentally the same as a manager/facilitator/leader in another sector? There is a level of curation, for sure, but I wonder if it's not the profession that makes this role unique but something else – not quite a personality type (for there are many different personalities represented in the producers I interviewed, for example those who lead more from the front or more from the back, those who approach in a more matriarchal or more patriarchal way etc) but perhaps a certain temperament or set of tendencies or skills which enable (or drive?) someone to fulfil this kind of role. The established and respected Stage One producers training organisation outlines the "Theatre Producers skill-set" as:

- Negotiation
- Communication
- People management
- Knowledge of theatre audiences and appetite
- Scheduling
- Leadership
- Business management
- Financial planning
- Problem solving

The respected website 'Get Into Theatre' says "You will need a detailed understanding of the management and technical process involved in theatre production" and agrees with Stage One that you'll need business management, communication, financial planning, leadership, problem-solving, but replaces negotiation and scheduling with event management and organisation, and adds – usefully in my view – collaboration and teamwork.

If we extend the description of the producer role beyond the skills and interests of the performing arts, into a completely different field, do we discover that the alchemic combination of protecting and exploding, holding and shaping, shielding and revealing, following and leading, are actually present there too? If we peel away the surface layers of understanding being played back to me in interviews, is there something more fundamental about the role: holding a vision or goal, understanding people and what they

need, surveying a landscape, assessing opportunities and dangers, deploying people to work together, making choices and decisions, taking responsibility. Described like this, it feels less like super-heroics, and more like skilled leadership.

So why do we reach for the language of alchemy, magic and superhuman powers? I'm not sure it's just because we are working in a creative industry and have vivid imaginations. I think it might have something to do with how challenging the context in which we are working is, and the need for both artists and producers alike to recognise that a perfectly normal set of leadership skills in one context, require a whole new level of recognition in a context which makes them extraordinary.

So what, if anything, is extraordinary about our context?

Sankofa

Artist Pauline Mayers introduced me to the idea of Sankofa. The Akan people of Ghana use an adinkra symbol of a bird with its head turned backwards to capture an egg to symbolise taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. In the spirit of Sankofa, I'm trying to understand what the impact of the role of the independent producer has been over the last twenty years, in order to better understand what role the producer might play in recovery and future building.

At a time when the theatre industry is in peril of various kinds – reeling from the social and financial impacts of Covid, with the freelance workforce leaving the sector or demanding full-scale changes in conditions, and culture wars playing out across policies, institutions, and media, it feels critical to understand how producers, audiences, artists, and partners have been affected across a range of contexts, processes and places, and therefore what insight we can glean about the future role, in a complex ecosystem, of the independent producer, in enabling the UK's performance industry to thrive. Despite the growing importance of this role within the UK cultural sector, there is little literature that examines its history and practice. This research works towards a tangible resource for our sector to understand approaches that might guide us through an unpredictable future.

Twenty years ago, producing began to be reinvented in the subsidised live performance sector. Fuel, founded in 2004 and the first explicitly 'producing' organisation to be core funded by Arts Council England in 2009, was at the forefront of this change.

There were producers before us, of course, in the commercial sector, in a much more well-established and recognised role as the 'money men' (and yes, mostly men then although thankfully not now – in my professional lifetime, I've seen and continue to celebrate the successes of Rosemary Squire, Nica Burns, Hedda Beeby, Kash Bennet, Eleanor Lloyd, Nia Janis, Kate Pakenham, the meteoric success of Sonia Friedman, and now the next generation embodied in the bold and brilliant Ameena Hamid).

There were producers before us in the subsidised sector too. In 2003, when Louise Blackwell, Sarah Golding nee Quelch and I started imagining a company together, we went to meet 'producers' who inspired us – who had a wide variety of different approaches. We met Michael Morris of Artangel, Judith Knight of Artangel, David Aukin – independent producer across theatre, TV and film - and more. They gave us their time, their counsel, their encouragement, and insights into their worlds which have stayed with me ever since. Like magpies, we took what inspired us from each of their models, along with our own instincts and dreams, and hoped we could create a model uniquely our own. In 2004, we began our programme.

In 2007, the Arts Council and Jerwood Charitable Foundation co-published a book about producers, celebrating a range of producers from Farooq Chaudhry to Joana Seguro: its editor, Kate Tyndall, wrote in the introduction

> The producer is a role that has struggled to establish itself in the arts. Yet at this time of massive social, cultural and environmental change, perhaps we have never needed them more. (The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible, ed. Tyndall, 2007).

In 2009, Birkbeck College at the University of London, created the first dedicated M.A. in Creative Theatre Producing. Since then, producing courses at HEIs have sprung up and proved popular. You can do an MA in Creative Producing at Mountview, Central School of Speech of Drama – as well as at University of Kent, University of the West of England in Bristol, Bath Spa University, and you can even find undergraduate BA courses in Creative Producing e.g. at the University of Essex. As Sarah Wilson-White observes:

> Producing has hugely changed, and my own career is evidence of that - having been the first cohort of the Creative Producing degree at Central. There are now texts about the subject and producing - versus arts administration - is a really appealing career to many people with courses at several other drama schools and universities.

Networks of producers, and training programmes have also emerged over this period – Producers Gathering, Producers Pool, UK Theatre Producers on Facebook. In Fuel's case, as well as delivering masterclasses for undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, and developing a producing internship programme, we hosted a residency for independent producers at Cove Park in 2011 which became the blueprint for Producer Farm, a residency for producers co-created and co-produced with Coombe Farm Studios, Dance Umbrella, Bristol Ferment and In Between Time, with its first edition in 2016.

But the revolution has not just been in higher education and training: theatres and organisations whose staff never previously included a 'producer' have recruited and centred these roles. Where there was once a 'General Manager', an 'Arts Administrator', a 'Tour Booker', you start to see 'Producer' roles appearing, then hierarchies forming - 'Assistant Producer', 'Senior Producer' - and then diversifying into specialisms – 'Development Producer', 'Participation Producer'. Producers started being appointed as Artistic Directors – in 2004, David Jubb at Battersea Arts Centre was a notable example. Here too, Fuel's contribution has largely been in 'on-the-job' training, driven by a belief Louise and I shared that if the role is fundamentally about 'making things happen', then the best possible route to experience is learning by doing, in a supported context. I think one of Fuel's most impactful legacies is our producing staff alumni: each one brought their experience, their instincts, their passion to their roles, and learnt huge amounts during their time at Fuel. In 2014, Clara Giraud writes:

> My internship with Fuel was an experimentation – what's all this producing about? Is it any fun? Is it what I want to be doing? And then, a whole universe of endless possibilities and dreams opened up to me. (Birthday Cards, Manuel Vason).

At this point, ten years since its inception, Fuel was described as being "an inspiration for other companies" and as making "producing seem as sexy and playful as writing or directing or devising" by Lyn Gardner, in an article in The Guardian where she also speaks to the relationship between producer and context with these words:

> It would be easy to say that Fuel came along at a good moment in British theatre, when the old models of making work were disappearing and theatre was starting to shape shift. Fuel undoubtedly benefited from those changes, but it has also been instrumental in bringing about that change by brokering relationships between the company and artists… and also between artists and theatres, arts organisations and – perhaps most – importantly, audiences. (The Guardian, 13 May 2014).

When I asked producers during this research about changes in the role of the producer over 20 years, Louise Blackwell also recognised the two truths here – that we both benefitted from and contributed to a shift in culture around producing:

> When we began Fuel and started producing in a world coming to the end of New Labour, the funding situation was certainly different, but we also were at a moment in time where it was very de rigeur to think about what producers were and to support producers. I think that the funding situation has changed pretty radically, that the conversation around freelancers because of what happened in the pandemic, because of the work that lots of people including Fuel, did around freelancers, has changed the perception of a producer. I think when we started it, it was kind of ArtsAdmin, in a way, that we were thinking about, as producers in a similar way to us. And now there's amazing companies and I think producer as a role is valued much more.

Kate Scanlan agrees:

> When I started my career, it was all about being a dance manager. That was cool, right? And then that language became uncool. Before that was administrator - that became very un-cool. And then it was about being a producer. And then everyone was a producer. And I think these kind of titles shifts that happen are great, but they're also, well - not everyone is actually producing. It wasn't until I left Sadler's Well, when I left Breaking Convention, that I realized what being a producer actually was. And a few years later I worked with you and I was like, oh wow, okay. This is how Fuel do it. Okay, fine.

As Kate articulates so honestly here, it isn't as simple as changing job title from manager to administrator to producer but essentially doing the same thing. Producing is different from managing or administrating. Whilst there are producers training, producers in buildings, in organisations, working independently, there is still a deficit of deep understanding and so much

potential. As Kate Scanlan adds:

> The role of producer, the understanding of producer, I still think is in its infancy to be perfectly honest... In dance and hip hop, lots of people try and emulate Farooq [Chaudhry] because I think he's a brilliant, brilliant producer and very inspirational. But I think what's interesting now, I think there are more examples of producers that are quite different, doing it in their own different way, and I think that's what's shifted is that we need different models of producing.

And why do we need different models of producing now and in the future? Well, because the context has changed hugely over that 20-year period, and I would suggest changes over the next 20 years will be even more seismic.

The challenges facing the UK at the present time, and the arts sector more specifically, are well documented and widely recognised. The state of the economy with inflation at its highest in 14 years, a cost-of-living crisis, and widening economic inequality (Trussell Trust opened its first food bank in 2000 and today manages a network of 1,200 across the UK), all have impacts on the performing arts. One aspect of this is put simply by Ed Collier: "Particularly right now, people have less money to spend on entertainment, going to the theatre."

In addition, the impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt across the arts and cultural sectors: audience attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, the workforce exodus caused by theatre closures created skills gaps which will take years to resolve (particularly in technical roles), organisations are still running with depleted reserves and lower headcounts following losses and redundancies. Kathryn Bilyard flags other changes in the freelance workforce:

> At the moment, the thing that is shifting is the conversation around our freelance workforce and caring for that workforce in stepping up how we all care for freelancers, which is changing a lot in terms of day to day, because even at the very beginning that impacts how you might get something off the ground. It's going to cost more, at the most basic level, paying people better, embedding wellbeing support, looking at the balance now between when you get to get physically in the space and how much work happens digitally.

The increase in focus on care which Kathryn raises is a big change identified by Anthony Gray too, as a positive for everyone working in the arts industry, including producers:

> There's so much more focus and needed focus around wellbeing and the impact of this type of work on not only the creatives but the producers. I think we're kind of the last people to come into that

> conversation. I think producers have been the last people to be seen as human, I would say, and that's been a huge shift. I think for far too long producers have just been seen as these machines who never make mistakes and just can crack on and are available 24 hours of the day. I think that's the biggest change for me. There's a better understanding of the mental health side of working in this industry which is really important.

Better understanding of mental health is a widespread phenomenon, but how does it really affect producers who can be, as in the image of Iron Man's Suit, seen as "machines" rather than "human"? Perhaps, with new and varied challenges to overcome, the toll on producers' mental health is also more visible.

If a crucial element of the producing role is securing the resource to make the project happen, and delivering it within that resource i.e. on budget, then it's no surprise that the economic and financial context is creating considerable challenges and stresses for producers. With competition for funding high, and increased costs for materials, transport, services and staffing, the available funds simply can't cover what they used to. A Fuel production budgeted in 2019 for production in 2020 was finally staged in 2022, following Covid delays, and the production budget had to be doubled to achieve the same ends. In only three months between May and August 2022, transport costs for one Fuel touring project increased by 30%. Whilst ACE's advice on this seems to be to do less, the reality is that the model for most independent producers doesn't work with low levels of subsidy unless you are producing a critical mass of work – whether as a self-employed producer or as a producing company. In other words, doing less doesn't necessarily make it easier. This is an existential threat to the nascent and vibrant producing ecology which started to develop in the early 2000s, as Kate Scanlan warns:

> At the moment with the cost-of-living crisis and everything and with the funding that you can get being so small, I feel like we are losing a lot of producers because it's just a very unsustainable part of the sector

These economic pressures on producers are very real, and they are compounded by other issues which directly and indirectly affect the work we do. For example, an increasing focus on STEM subjects has decimated arts education, a change which particularly worries Christina Elliot:

> I think the biggest challenge for producers is the erosion of the value of an arts education, because I think that if you don't instil a sense of the fundamental value of the arts early in someone's life, you have to somehow work from scratch to develop that at some point at which

> you might be lucky enough to meet those people in some context later on. I think if you take it as a given that our enriches our lives, then you somehow have a stronger, firmer foundation on which to build brilliant happenings and for art to surprise and to somehow interrupt or make a difference somehow in it. It becomes more possible if you have a society in which the art is valued. And in a way, everything, every other challenge comes back to that.

She goes on to articulate how Brexit also continues to have practical ramifications for international collaboration and touring:

> Brexit is making it harder to tour within Europe, and I think making it harder for EU students to study in the UK. I think it is having a really big impact or going to have a really big impact in the dance sector, which is a very international sector, but the fact that now only very wealthy European young people can come and study in the UK, I think changes how we interact with our colleagues, friends, future collaborators in Europe, massively. And the internationalizing of the work that we do becomes harder at the same time as it becomes harder to make a case for work in a domestic context.

Fuel has absolutely felt these practical and economic challenges. In 2021 we took part in a pilot project supporting European collaboration and co-production entitled Perform Europe. The pilot has since been extended but sadly the UK is no longer able to participate and benefit as we have left the EU and opted not to contribute to and therefore benefit from Creative Europe initiatives and funding. Just one example of many issues caused by Brexit being raised across the industry in different forums at present.

And why is it harder to make a case for work in a domestic context?

> I think what's changed is that it's no longer possible to develop a work in isolation to from an increasingly politicized arts environment. So I suppose what I mean by that is, as the arm's length of the Arts Council is eroded, the politics of how and why work is made is needs to be addressed by producers and artists, but producers for sure. Otherwise, it's very difficult to get it made.
>
> It's not enough to have a good idea and an audience for that idea, you need to know where it fits amongst a number of priorities for various different stakeholders. And it was ever thus, but that sense for me is that is increasing, that the value of an artist as being someone who can be a kind of litmus test for the ideas that are urgent in society is somehow being eroded. It's somehow not enough now for an artist to say I have a brilliant idea. They need to justify that idea somehow or where they got their idea or in consultation with whom that idea was developed.

This increasingly politicised cultural context which Christina describes, and which was exemplified in Nadine Dorries' time as Culture Secretary, eroding the arm's length principle with every move, includes growing 'culture wars', the politics surrounding the government's so-called Levelling Up policy, and Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy. I would add to this list the gradual but determined decimation of the welfare state leading to a far wider 'remit' for the cultural sector covering everything from Warm Hubs to Social Prescribing. We can argue the case for or against any of these developments: but there's no denying this represents significant changes in context over a 20-year period. As one of the key skills for the producer is an ability to scan the horizon, to understand the territory, to function in the environment in which they are producing, these changes represent vivid changes to that landscape.

The proliferation of TV streaming services increasing competition for cultural attention worries Ed Collier, whilst also recognising that theatre producers are now working across broadcast themselves. There are therefore pros and cons to this change:

> I think the competition for people's time is different. 20 years ago, this is anecdotal, but it feels like more people went to the theatre more often and there were basically five TV channels to compete with and Blockbuster. Whereas now there's TV on demand and the quality of it is extraordinary. So actually, the competition for people's imaginative space, creative time is huge.

But the same technological advances across this 20-year period, and an acceleration during the Covid years of digital communication and remote working, create opportunities for producers too, as Louise Blackwell identifies:

> On a very kind of practical level, when I very first started producing, I was doing cashflows on paper with pencil and a rubber. The communication tools and technology that we now have to be able to collaborate more online. Obviously Zoom, obviously not having to travel so much is a really, really great thing... I think just the ability to collaborate internationally in fact has changed radically, since I first started as a producer.

Another area which has seen both progress and setbacks in these two decades is the arts sector's work on diversity, inclusivity, and access. How representative the industry is or isn't, across protected characteristic and

class, how inclusive its practices are, how accessible every aspect of live performance production and presentation is – there are brilliant research papers and books (including Dave O'Brien's 2020 publication 'Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries') which document the victories and failures in these areas across the 20-year period. It's a complex picture and again, I aim for future research to delve deeper here.

For Anthony Gray, there has been a positive change in his day-to-day experience:

> I would say I walk into a room now and I'm not the only black person. That's really nice. It needs to be better for sure. But yeah, that's been a really lovely change.

This simple statement encapsulates both the progress which has been made across inclusion, diversity, equality and access, and the simple truth that "it needs to be better for sure." This truth applies to the whole sector, with areas of significant progress and areas where there are fresh concerns, born of the talent exodus caused by the pandemic and economic context which now creates fresh barriers for people of demographics which are already under-represented in the arts. For Fuel, we've been fundamentally committed since day one to telling stories which aren't being told, and to widening access to the arts across all areas of the workforce and audiences/participants alike. We have made a positive contribution to the changes we want to see, and I believe we always have more to learn and more to contribute. I'll touch more on this later with respect to representation, one of Fuel's core values.

Values

Since early dialogue about the company's name and purpose, demonstrated throughout documents held in the archive as well as in its recently published Business Plan, Fuel cites its values as central to its practice: "Our vision will be realised through **values-led** relationships with artists, communities and places, supported by local, national and international partnerships." (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 6). I'm interested in how these values have evolved over time, how they actually manifest in practice, and what the impact of this approach has been over twenty years.

By tracing the development of Fuel's values through archival research, conversations with producers and artists, this research hopes to shed light on what values like "collaboration" in producing mean now and for the future. As practice-led research, my inquiry seeks to establish the parameters of these terms as they have been understood by Fuel.

Perhaps the place to start is why values – or guiding principles – might be useful. Again, there is a growing reading list of corporate management and leadership literature on this subject, with varying views, but for me it has always been clear. My values are the constellation of stars which help me navigate through the night sky. They exist in relationship with each other. Some shine brighter than others in a given moment, but they are all essential to my evolving practice. They are not static but shaped by my experience and what I learn from it along the way – but equally they are not whimsical or changeable, as they are deeply held.

This image of values as navigating tools felt very strong to me when the Covid pandemic hit and all of our planned programme had to be cancelled. Being a theatre production company who couldn't produce theatre inevitably led to grief, anxiety and a temporary sense of confusion about purpose. In that moment, I felt extreme clarity that holding on to our values would help us through the crisis – and that they would help me personally to lead. I wrote to the staff team on 3 April 2020, with a provisional "plan" for how we would approach lockdown (not knowing, of course, how long that might be), which included these words:

> We will try to inspire each other and those we engage with by **living our values** – creativity, collaboration, representation, learning, trust, curiosity and now sustainability too – and in the process have as much fun as we can together. There are difficult weeks and months ahead for us, our friends, families and colleagues. Let's be kind and useful.

Fuel's Senior Producer Sarah Wilson-White's comments reflected this approach:

> Values-led producing is the road map to a producer's practice, and when things get lost or confused, they exist to remind us why we're on the journey in the first place.

Our values immediately and practically helped us navigate the chaos of that first lockdown, whilst we took time to find new ways to fulfil our vision and purpose in the context of crisis. We knew how we wished to be before we

knew what we would do. I believe there is always a dance between purpose and values – together they form a vision of the future you wish to create and shape the actions you will take to get there. You will only find your true destination if you navigate by your values.

I've written about trust above. Let's start with collaboration.

Collaboration

The term 'collaboration' was articulated as a core value in Fuel's 2017-22 Business Plan, and features in definitions of three of Fuel's core values in our 2022-27 Business Plan: 'creativity', 'curiosity' and 'trust'. Fuel's vision statement reads:

> Our work is made with, by and for artists, audiences and our team: we are all theatre-makers. Our purpose, as a team, is to bring these artists and audiences together. (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 6).

We go on to talk about partnerships and relationships: the emphasis is very much on people and on collaboration.

The emphasis on collaboration, and the language of collaboration, runs throughout this document: "made with", "all theatre-makers", "as a team", "bring…together", "relationships with", "partnerships". We are very consciously collaborative: I have chosen theatre, or live performance, as my primary art form because it cannot be made alone, only as a team, and it cannot be experienced alone. This is a political choice: theatre insists we can work together to be more than the sum of our parts, it creates a space for different people – friends and family, neighbours and strangers - to be together, to share stories and images of our relationship with each other and the world around us, to experience something collectively. At its best, it reminds us through its very form of our collective humanity. At its most dead and dull, it forgets this beauty and power – and renders itself irrelevant.

When Fuel launched, we had a tagline which articulated our purpose as "to produce fresh work for adventurous people by inspiring artists". We deliberately found and celebrated the double meaning of the phrase "by inspiring artists" – the work would be created by artists who were inspiring, and by producers who inspired artists, the word "inspiring" functioning both as an adjective to describe the artists and a verb to describe what we as producers do. At the heart of our understanding of collaboration was the idea that this was a two-way street, that as producers we would work with artists both reactively and proactively. In addition to this, the description of

our participants and audiences as “adventurous people”, long debated for fear we might put off the timid or risk averse, echoes this idea of a proactive relationship: the people who experience our work as participants or audiences are proactively joining us on an adventure – they are not passive observers but active explorers with us. Although we’ve interrogated it regularly through the years, we still use this phrase as, even within its compact form, it holds so much meaning for us, about the collaborative nature of our approach.

It’s worth pausing at this point to note that Fuel was formed and led for 12 years as a collaboration between myself and Louise Blackwell. Although Louise left Fuel in 2017, this will probably always be the most powerful collaboration of my professional life – as well as a profoundly important friendship. We shared a set of values and a vision which we discovered working together at BAC and which continued to grow and evolve over the time we worked together as Co-Directors of Fuel. We gave each other the courage to leave our jobs and begin our own company. I learnt a huge amount from Louise, five years older and infinitely wiser. We brought different skills and experience to the founding of Fuel, and we pursued distinct but deeply connected passions through our time together at Fuel. We worked together on the organisational development of the company, and on some commissioned projects, and we supported each other in the projects we each produced. We celebrated our successes together, and we survived many challenging times together. Practically, we curated our programme together, we wrote our Business Plans together, we led the team and managed the finances together, we batted funding applications and pitches between us to make them stronger, we did a damn fine double act in meetings, and across the years, we held the company for each other during a total of four maternity leaves. Whilst even the most powerful collaborations can run their course, and it’s perhaps natural for paths to diverge as we grow and change in our professional lives, I miss my collaboration with Louise, my professional sister, who knows me – for better and for worse - like only family can.

So, in this example and many others, collaboration has been and continues to be at the heart of Fuel’s ethos. But what has the impact of collaborative working been on artists, audiences, staff and partners who have created theatre together across nearly twenty years? What examples can we draw on to learn for the future? Talking to producers and artists linked to Fuel, past and present, I asked them to reflect on collaboration, and what it has meant and means to them. But I’m not interested in waffle about collaboration – I wanted tangible examples. Who were their key collaborators and how did that manifest in their practice? For Louise, firstly there was a triangle:

> There's the producer, the production manager, and the artists. That's the kind of triangle of key collaboration for me. I think without having somebody who can help to realize the ambitious or unusual or risky ideas that the artists have and that me as a producer is trying to kind of facilitate and realize and move forward, everything falls apart. It's not possible to, to make stuff happen in the real world without somebody who knows how to do that practically. So those are the two key collaborators, definitely.

I recognise this triangle, and it's worth noting here that for 10 years, Fuel's Production Manager then Head of Production, Stuart Heyes, was my key collaborator in this production management role. For the last five years, he continued to be a crucial collaborator for me in a new role as Associate Director at Fuel, as he sought new challenges and outlets for his experience, creativity and skills, and supported my leadership of the company.

The third point of the triangle here, the artist, is of course a crucial collaboration, which I've already explored in detail – with more to come. But then Louise goes on to add a different group of collaborators:

> But actually, you know, without money, without resource, nothing is possible... In terms of making ambitious, creative, artistic high-quality ideas, meet an audience in real time, there has to be money involved and other resource. And so increasingly, and in sort of different ways, people who have keys to buildings or can give permission to public space or people who have money that can pay for these ideas to become a reality are actually some of the very key component parts and therefore collaborators... And so hopefully those collaborators can be a really important part of the kind of creative process. And if they're not, it's a blooming disaster.

So as well as production managers and artists, venues and funders are also key collaborators. This is perhaps particularly true of Fuel, a building-free organisation which is therefore always working in partnership with the gatekeepers of particular spaces, be they theatres, schools, carparks, or "public" space. For us this collaboration is not simply about permission to use space – these gatekeepers are also often one of our key conduits (although not necessarily the only ones) to establishing connections with audiences and participants, and in many cases supporters, co-commissioners or co-producers of the work, providing crucial resources (in cash or in kind) to help make the project happen.

So what does collaborative producing mean now and what new forms does it take?

In 2020, amidst the turmoil of the pandemic, we found ourselves working in completely new ways with artists. We were all working remotely, using Zoom really for the first time, un-producing planned projects, reimagining others to take different forms, and inventing and initiating whole new strands of activity, including a significant commitment to sector support focused on freelancers, all whilst in an existential financial crisis requiring furloughing staff, desperate fundraising and reforecasting of budgets and cashflows, and emergency board meetings. The artists we were working with were in varying states of crisis, as we discovered through phone calls, emails, and drop-in zoom sessions we set up every Friday from April 2020.

At some point during this turmoil, I felt a strong need to articulate how we – as a team – would uphold our values. Not a theoretical or ephemeral expression of them, but an actual practical guide – and commitment – to delivering on them. One of the drivers was a desire for us to be consistent about this across the team, who – whilst strongly bonded by the crisis and truly heroic in their efforts - were no longer all in the same office breathing the same air.

I drafted something, entitled "Looking after relationships with theatre makers" shared it with members of the producing team, and once we'd arrived at something which felt useful, we spent time in team meetings talking through how it would be consistently implemented. In the document, I linked "trust" and "collaboration" as one section, instinctively reinforcing the idea that trust is the bedrock of successful collaboration. The document articulates that this process starts with an "introduction to key team members working on project" because:

> We aim to start well. A good start means introducing all theatre makers to the whole team and explaining what everyone's purpose is in the process. It also means inducting the artist into all of Fuel's strange ways and inducting the Fuel team into the strange ways of the artist and their project. We expect questions to be asked in both directions. (Looking after relationships with theatre makers, Kate McGrath, 2021)

This final point a reminder that the establishment of collaboration and trust is a two-way street. By declaring our values, and defining them as best we can, we seek to meet our collaborators openly and transparently, to be clear about our values, to be curious about theirs, and to search for common ground – a Venn diagram, the intersection of which is where we will meet as collaborators. But just as our Venn diagram will have an area of intersection

and also areas where our values differ – which are just as important to identify, recognise and acknowledge – so our values exist in dynamic relationship with each other. I talk to the team about areas of conflict in these terms sometimes e.g. what is happening here, in this moment of a difficult decision or choice, is that two of our values are in tension with each other. We need to unpick both of them and recognise that we may not be able to fully reconcile them in every situation, but by understanding what is at play, we can make better choices and understand what those choices are.

To help with this tension, this same document also borrows from Alan Lane of Slung Low's motto "Be useful and kind", outlining the need for mutual understanding, clarity and transparency:

> We see mutual understanding and compassion as the bedrock of a good relationship. We aim to have as clear an understanding of the whole picture as possible, however changeable this picture may be. We seek to offer the theatre maker a transparent overview of how things look from our perspective.

This idea of transparency is then developed into a commitment to "avoid promising what we cannot absolutely guarantee", and to be "honest about our capabilities and capacity from the beginning". Whilst I think Fuel is good at being honest and transparent with artists, we have often struggled with the balance between the required drive and stubbornness to make impossible things happen – sometimes the role of the producer is to keep the candle of an idea alight whilst everyone around it believes it to be unachievable – and the risk of pushing this to the point where we are actually trying to deliver the impossible, with some version of failure – in the quality of the work itself, in keeping to the set timeline or budget, or in exhausting those involved – somewhat inevitable. So this one requires us to hold that line – which does not always appear to be in the same place for everyone – with as much honesty as we can.

Step by step, this document goes on to outline how we will "sometimes serve" and "sometimes lead", how important "communication" is - specifying our minimum commitments e.g. to a "session to set aims", a "meet and greet", weekly, fortnightly or monthly meetings and/or emails depending on the stage the project is at and the role the artist is in. We also commit "to be available according to the requirements of the work as far as is possible whilst maintaining our own wellbeing, and to communicate with clarity about when we are not available" – a nuance which might not have been articulated when we started work in 2004, perhaps echoing Anthony's observation that

wellbeing and mental health have – happily - travelled further up the agenda for ourselves as producers. We also commit to – and require commitment to – an evaluation process at the end of each project or phase of a project.

In terms of grounding the collaboration, we also commit to contracts, timelines with clear milestones and parameters, and acknowledge the complex processes and contexts we work in by noting:

> Whilst recognising that we are not able to control all factors around a project, we aim to be as clear as possible about the available resource for the project, and where there are unresolved parameters, to work together to resolve them.

In some sense, this document seeks to lay out in ethical and practical terms what we mean by our values and how we will activate them in reality. This feels crucial to me – otherwise they are just words which can either be dismissed as good intentions without the carry through or misinterpreted through a lack of stated definition.

To dig deeper into how producers actually enact their values, I spoke to other producers who have – at some point – worked at Fuel, about what a key collaboration has meant to them. Ed Collier of China Plate says this:

> One of the longest collaborations that I've been involved with is with Caroline Horton... I can't even think how many shows we've made together now... That relationship has taught me a massive amount about producing and making work, and how to do things well and when things have not gone so well and it's hugely affected a lot of the function of China Plate and focus of China Plate over that time as well.
>
> One of the biggest lessons that's taught me is how to really deeply trust somebody in a creative process when both you and they don't know where it's going to go... There have been moments in which I think we've both hit a wall with it and not known how it's going to come out the other end... Working with somebody over that period of time, and with Caroline always working with material that's hugely personal for her, either because it's politically personal or because it's directly related to her own experience, has really shown me how and when to give up being in control and let somebody run with an idea that I don't understand and I don't need to understand all of it.
>
> That's had a big impact, but that's a very difficult place to get to and isn't something that you can make a first show with somebody in place.
>
> I'd also say from a, a practical point of view, working with Caroline over a very long period of time has also really helped me and China Plate more widely think about how we support artists' wellbeing

> and wider team wellbeing through those processes. We were careful but basically busked it with Caroline for a long time, but consciously busked it when making pieces like Mess, which was about her experience of anorexia, and recovery. We worked with her therapist and medical people that had worked with her through that process, which was very helpful for the show. But collectively the focus of that was about how we work with those people to create a piece of theatre that really reflected it whilst as producers we were acutely aware of the position that Caroline was potentially putting it herself in, in terms of talking about a thing that in talking about it is triggering. And so from there we began thinking about how we create structures around artists' wellbeing, which Rosie Kelly, who was our senior producer for a long time, was very, very closely involved with and passionate about. That's allowed us to make work that we couldn't possibly have done without it. It is also very definitely an ongoing process, but it was that relationship with Caroline that helped China Plate realise how important that was.

The benefits of collaboration time here are articulated so clearly as reaping the rewards of deep trust – which takes time to build – on both sides. There is a humility in how Ed talks about what he has learnt from this long-term collaboration which has informed his personal practice – giving up control – and his company's practice – introducing wider learning around wellbeing.

Hannah Smith also reflects on the impact of her long-term collaboration with The Wardrobe Ensemble on her as a producer:

> I have worked with devising company The Wardrobe Ensemble (TWE) for ten years now (nearly the whole of my career) and that collaborative relationship has completely shaped me as a producer. I have grown and developed my skills alongside the company, as well as developing my theatrical taste. As a result of working with TWE I have found myself specialising in devised work, and mainly working with Southwest based artists. My favourite part of working on multiple projects with the same artists is the R&D stages and assembling partners - choosing venues & organisations who suit the project, and setting strategy for a company over a number of years.

For Hannah, this long-term collaboration, then, has significant impact on her own practice, taste, networks, skills and specialisms – and it has enabled her as a producer to work more strategically, benefitting the ensemble.

Kathryn Bilyard also talks about building her collaboration with Improbable over time:

> We started with the project collaboration and then as we've got to know each other more and more I can embed what they're really driving at for their organization. Then we've moved into that kind

> of bigger picture as collaborators: where we go, what impact do we want to have? And I see their work and I can see it having so much impact everywhere, which is really exciting... I learn more about it, then I can find those little opportunities and go, okay, right, we should be supporting this, or we need to make this, we need to share this work more. We need to tell people about how we made it. So we made a podcast so that people can listen to it, because otherwise you never see any of that work or you don't see the connections between the shows that look quite disparate. That kind of thing is now coming out of that longer term collaboration.

It's interesting that the beginning of the journey of collaboration Kathryn describes was the projects, and time is enabling it to grow into something wider – about producing the company, not just its productions. My experience of this phenomenon is that the producer journey can indeed move from making a project happen to developing an artist or company more widely – and beyond that, to producing change in the wider sector, in policy, in culture, in society. It is understanding this journey from the bedrock of making a project happen well to making much wider change that enables a good producer to connect the day-to-day work they do with the deeper impact they wish to make.

Fuel has often started a new collaboration with an artist with one project, to see how the relationship works in reality, before either side commits to more work together. This has enabled us to explore the dynamics of the relationship, learn from that, and decide together if we'll work together more. I have really valued the one-off collaborations where we've made something extraordinary happen together in a way which has been enriching and productive for both and for audiences and held legacies for us all – our collaboration with Belarus Free Theatre to produce Minsk 2011, created as they moved to the UK, is a memorable example. I value the long-term collaborations in a different way, recognising both the accumulated trust which Ed feels, and the shift from project producing to artist producing which Kathryn describes. My own ongoing development as a producer is, I believe, the result of a combination of what I learn through my insatiable curiosity for the new, fresh, and unknown, with what I learn through long-term collaboration, reflection, repetition with variation, evaluation – looking backwards in order to move forwards, as the Sankofa bird does. By practicing

curiosity and learning as two of Fuel's core values, and placing emphasis on both experimentation and evaluation, as well as working daily to create a culture within the team which celebrates both successes and learning, I seek to embed this combination of the vitality of the new with the power of accumulated understanding. For me, one of those long-term collaborations, over around 15 years now, has been with Inua Ellams, who notes that he has learnt over time what the value of that relationship is to him:

> I think it's changed in the sense that, not that I took it for granted, but in the start of our working relationship, I just assumed this was the case for everybody, and then I've realized that it really isn't. So I've begun to understand the importance of it and the value of it.

Kate Scanlan tells a story from the producer's perspective about how her collaboration with B Boy Pervez Live changed as she grew more confident and experienced, and as he began to understand her role as a producer more:

> I think at the beginning of the relationship, I was a bit in awe of this person that was like an incredible creative talent and had done you know, the really, really important thing of laying the foundation and creating a culture. And I was a bit like, oh wow, I'm not really that worthy. Over the last decade, I've done so many different things in so many different contexts with my producing, I feel as worthy a collaborative partner. So now I think we have a much more equal partnership. And I think in the beginning, because I didn't feel confident when he would give me feedback on something, I'd take it really negatively and really personally. And I feel like now we have a really great relationship because we can sort of really reflect each other areas where we need to do more or where we need to tone it down, slow down, and so I feel now, when we give each other constructive criticism, it really is like a two-way street. And I feel like we respect each other's strengths now, and we're really aware of the differences in the partnership and what we both bring.
>
> I think the producing bit is always challenging though, right? Because so much of the producing role has to happen before you get anywhere near a creative, like actual actualized moment, like in the studio or an event, whatever. So I think that's the bit that ... I mean, I'm speaking for him, right? But I think that's the bit that I think he's realized over the years is actually how hard you have to work as a producer to get to the moment where he starts the project essentially. Obviously, he's involved in the creative concept, but I think there's a realization that actually there's points where my work is the most important bit in the realizing of this idea. And then there's another moment where it's his point to be the lead. So I think that's something that we've both learnt over the time. So it's a much richer relationship, right? Because it feels much more equitable. We understand the strength and weaknesses and I think it's more interesting and more powerful.

I find it so telling that in the middle of telling a story of increased mutual understanding and growing equity, Kate almost confides in me "the producing bit is always challenging though, right?" This points to the invisibility or opacity of the producing process. We've talked about this over the years at

Fuel – how visible we should make our work to the artists we collaborate with, to our funders – even to each other within the team. Often, we're so busy doing it, we don't show our workings – but the cost of that can be high. I remember reflecting on this at the end of a long relationship with a company who we worked with exclusively over many years. They decided to take up an offer from another producer to develop a project without Fuel's involvement, and to end their relationship with Fuel. I was (perhaps naively) surprised and hurt. There were many reasons for their decision, I'm sure, but one comment they made struck me, as it revealed that they didn't really know or understand much of what we were doing as their producers – and it occurred to me that some of the responsibility for this lay with us because we hadn't really told them the half of it. They knew the big obvious things, but they didn't know we were working away in a whole host of different ways, because we didn't tell them, we just did it. And whether that was renewing their insurance or advocating for them in conversations with venues and funders, we hadn't found a mechanism to make sure they knew all of that was going on. So, we started to do that consciously with all the artists and companies we work with, in regular emails or meetings. To build trust, respect, equality, understanding – we need to communicate to collaborate. It seems simple, but so often it is assumed or presumed, and then things can go awry.

Christina Elliot also links respect and value to trust – and here again her comments suggest that sometimes a producer can feel their role is not understood or valued:

> In the collaborations that I have developed over the years, I would say that the most I important thing is trust. I mean, it sounds like an obvious thing, but I do think that essentially, they need to trust that you will do a good job with something that is very precious to them - an idea - and I need to trust that somehow, they also value something of what I bring to the process. I think if I have a sense that the role that I'm doing is not valued, it can be quite hard. Those can be the more challenging moments, where there's no shared sense of each person's value in the collaboration.

Perhaps what I'm arriving at through these conversations and reflections is a sense that the producer role is, not always but often, invisible, misunderstood, undervalued. That the producer – in their efforts to breathe life and confidence into a project – can hide their workings and their fears, their methodologies and their graft – and that, in doing so – they can be taken for granted by artists, or institutions, or funders – perhaps it is a role that is under-recognised in the eco-system as a whole. I have certainly felt that many times over the last twenty years – whether it be an artist deciding to take the funding we have raised to make the project without us, or

the Artistic Director of a major institution failing to acknowledge, credit or thank us as co-commissioners and co-producers in their press night speech, or a core funder seeming to reject our request for a desperately needed uplift on the grounds that we will keep going regardless, or reviewers crediting ownership of a production to the host venue who are only presenting rather than producing the work. There seems to be a 'value' system in our sector, widespread and deeply embedded, largely unacknowledged and unchallenged, which relates to what we recognise as 'real work' and therefore 'value': the work that writers, directors, performers do is visible and recognised (often under-'valued' in cash terms but definitely visible and recognised); the work that buildings do is visible and recognised, partly because the buildings are visible and recognised; but the work that producers do - like technicians, stage managers, production managers, costume and prop makers - is much less visible and much less valued. I've always insisted on not being described as an artist because I respect too highly the work that artists do and understand that it is distinct from what I do; but I've lost count of the number of times people who work in our industry in other roles have inferred either directly or indirectly that there isn't actually any expertise in producing, as if it's just something that some people do and others don't. What if we did explain what we do? What if everyone in the arts and cultural sector understood the role of the producer? What if great producers were identified, invested in and celebrated?

Before someone points out that this does happen and that I wouldn't be where I am now if it didn't, I willingly acknowledge that some very brilliant people have absolutely identified the producer role, invested in it, and celebrated it. Chief amongst these in my professional life was the phenomenal Roanne Dods, whose blend of experience as a dancer and as a lawyer led her to become a visionary founding Director of the Jerwood Charitable Foundation (now Jerwood Foundation). Roanne believed in the potential of producers and gave Louise, Sarah and I a grant which enabled us to set up Fuel in 2004. She championed producers in many other ways over the years and became de facto Chair of Fuel's advisory board, known as the Catalysts. As Graham Leicester and Maureen O'Hara wrote of Roanne:

> She saw that the arts are not just about artists and 'arts organisations'. There are also certain individuals who have the skill and capacity to mediate between creative artists on the one hand

> and structures of funding and accountability on the other to deliver acts of the imagination that are (by definition) unique and original. (International Futures Forum/Korea, 20 May 2022)

I consider crossing paths with Roanne at a critical moment in my professional development to have been an absolute game-changer. Her clarity, conviction and passionate advocacy for producing was deeply considered as well as genuinely, pragmatically helpful. The clarity of other producers I learned from also gave me confidence, for example in Michael Morris's clear articulation of the producer's role as connector: "It's the producer's role to be the bridge between the work and the world, the artist and the audience" (*The Producers*, *Alchemists of the Impossible*, 2007).

I've found that when we speak to audiences, they echo this understanding. In the audience survey for this research, I asked "What do you think is the most important thing a producer does?" and received this response: "Creates the conditions in which artists can flourish and then gets the work to audiences."

I'm also lucky enough to work with artists who 'get it', and I am more articulate about my understanding of the role now so that I can usually accelerate that journey of mutual understanding – I hope. ESKA articulates how she understands the heart of the collaboration to be creativity:

> I've been very fortunate, I think with the producers that I've encountered that... it feels very much that they are an artist too, even though their job seems like there's a more sort of administrative aspect to it. And that's super important, to have a great organized administrative mind as a producer, to be able to hold that space for the artist but they are a creative person as well. And I think they flourish best when they're also allowed that opportunity to be creative and that the way that they work is not just seen as this sort of functional role, that's nuts and bolts, about sorting out the artist's world, because there's creativity in doing that, but also it's the eye, it's the ear, all of those things. The taste, all of the things that is to do with aesthetic. You know, it is an artistic mind. It's a creative mind. And I think the collaboration with the artist and the producer grows as long as both of them are growing artistically.

Creativity

This idea of the producer as creative of course echoes the relatively recent terminology of "creative producing", a trend I understand but take a sceptical view of.

One of Fuel's current core values is creativity:

> Producing is creating something new in collaboration with others. In producing we seek to embolden, support and celebrate the creativity of everyone we work with and for (Fuel Business Plan 2022-27, page 7).

Despite this overarching commitment to creativity, Fuel has maintained a critical relationship with the fashionable term 'creative producer': arising from a perceived need to centre the role of the producer in the creative process, the term has been widely adopted across the UK's subsidised theatre sector. But in foregrounding creativity, what is undervalued in the producing role?

When Louise, Sarah and I were planning Fuel, we knew we needed a name. We asked the brilliant writer, director and performer Andy Smith to help us. As part of the process which led to the name 'Fuel', Andy wrote a paper in which he played back to us what he had heard us describe as our aims as follows:

> The company wants to support and develop cutting edge and brilliant theatre artists in all aspects of the production of new, groundbreaking and exciting theatre/performance work. An ability to generate the development of these companies in all aspects of the development of their work (fiscal/practical as well as creative/imaginative), lie at the core of what the company are looking to do. (What's in a name? Andy Smith, 2004)

From our earliest meetings, this combination of "fiscal/practical" with "creative/imaginative", or more broadly "all aspects" was "at the core" for us. That said, in July 2004, we wrote a paper entitled 'FUEL: Creative Theatre Thinking' (Blackwell/McGrath/Quelch) which opened with the words "Fuel is a new creative producing organisation… Creativity, strategy and interaction are at the heart of Fuel." Our "Company Mission Statement" went on to define these three values, with creativity defined as follows:

> Central to Fuel's creative producing is imaginative and inspiring dialogue with artists. Working in partnership, Fuel will instigate and develop ideas, helping them to flourish; foster collaborations; identify opportunities for training and development and guide the creative process. Fuel embraces the wildly inventive, cultivates craziness and dares artists to dream. (Fuel: Creative Theatre Thinking, Blackwell/McGrath/Quelch, 2004)

These exact same words are replicated in Fuel's 2007-2012 Business Plan – so this foregrounding of and definition of creativity was clearly working for us!

In my view, creativity is essential to great producing – and by creativity, I

mean active engagement in the actual process of developing and creating the work, bringing ideas and insight, as well as experience and skill in the actual craft of theatre-making, as well as creativity in your approach to audiences and audience development, partnerships and relationships, fundraising, budgeting, marketing – all of it! But I also believe that the rise and rise of 'Creative Producer' as role describer carries risks. It is essential to great producing to have hard skills and to deliver on the less obviously creative sides of the role – submitting your Theatre Tax Relief claim or PRS form is part of the job, as are applying for visas in a timely manner and knowing the consequences if a van on the road is overweight. The producer who claims their role is creative may ignore these pitfalls and who will pick them up if they do? Also, the ability to be creative as a producer does not make you a great artist – knowing the limits of your expertise is a crucial part of respecting the expertise of those you collaborate with. Equal, perhaps, but different, for sure. In many ways it is the distance between the creativity of the artist and the *different* creativity of the producer which enables the producer to be of any use to the artist – and vice versa - in my view. It was beautiful to read in the audience survey for this research, a response to the question "What difference do you think good producing makes?", the response "Creativity, excitement, pushing boundaries."

One of the 'slowest burn' projects I've worked on is with Khalid Abdalla, for good reasons, which I don't need to go into here. But over the course of the time that we've been working together, our relationship has developed immeasurably in terms of how we can now collaborate. He describes this collaboration here:

> Everyone has their traditional roles to a certain extent which is very important in terms of what they're doing. That's the primary thing they're focusing on but everyone's creative investment in the work should at some level break hierarchy in a proper collaboration. That's just absolutely fundamental. And I think how that develops over time is that, you know, yes, there's a space where something originates but together, we become guardians of what it can be, right?
>
> In relation to this [project], it's a very personal work, right, and it's originating very much so from my experience but I'm stepping into Fuel, which is your creation, right, yours and everyone else's, and is a space that I feel that I have witnessed grow over the length of those almost 20 years that we've known each other and so I feel like I want to live up to the meaning of that space in relation to the work that I am producing and the values that I've seen it try and hold and maintain over that, over that period of time. And so in some senses, I feel like that is the core of what our friendship has been and was even when we first met, right? It's this kind of instinct

> like we share values in relation to the world. We might articulate them differently in terms of what we're doing at different points in our life, but there comes this moment where these things come together. And so let's make something as beautiful as we can with everything that has come from my experience and everything that has come from your experience.

With other artists, this might be a faster process, or articulated in different ways, but I find Khalid's articulation of a meeting of minds at the right moment to be a very powerful description of the conditions that might enable a producer to work as an 'outside eye' on a very personal piece of work, both the content and form of which are being discovered by the artist through a collaborative process. As Hannah Smith summarises:

> I think one of the reasons that I have worked with The Wardrobe Ensemble for so long is that we instinctively share a lot of the same values.

As dramaturg Ruth Little said when I interviewed her about the 'outside eye' role back in 2010:

> We come into being through our relationships with one another, person to person, artist to audience. It's all about relationships actually, so let's be honest about that and make better relationships.

And if we do make better relationships? Then the conversation is about more than this project, or this note on this scene, but about a journey towards greater understanding and clarity. David Harradine, in the same set of interviews in 2010, said:

> Every project feels part of the same project in a way. I remember my conversation with you about *An Infinite Line* which happened quite a long time after it finished. It was a conversation about *An Infinite Line* for me it was a conversation about my practice and everything I do in a way and my approach to making what I do, in a way that was very enriching in terms of that, not in terms of feedback on this show. Each project seems like such a small part in a lifetime's work I'm more interested in the search than the arrival. So the conversation is more about that, the ongoing search, rather than the relative success of a particular thing.

For me, one of the great privileges of my role is to have the opportunity to follow an artist's practice over many years, to experience their work

with different audiences, to hear them speak, watch them work, gradually understand their process more and more, and to feel myself better able to support them through that learning. And of course every new collaboration fills me with curiosity in terms of what that new journey and relationship might reveal to me.

Returning to Khalid, and the journey of establishing trust and recognising a shared set of values, he says this:

> Who Fuel was during Covid was incredibly important to me, and not just me, but many other people. Whether it was in terms of just those Friday meetings or whether it was in terms of its response to the murder of George Floyd, those are values that are not always directly related to the production of a play, right? They are - and I think this is what theatre is really fundamentally about - about creating space and spaces where audiences meet, where work is made, where collaborators find each other, in which that constellation of values can find somewhere in the real world.
>
> You know, for me it's as much in work that I've seen you do as it is, you know… When I, when I came to see *Barber Shop Chronicles* during that preview and audience members were coming out like, you know, finally, there's a respect for the various different African accents and… that's a space in which I found myself as an Egyptian who knows what it feels like to be culturally misrepresented. Or I mean, frankly, you know, when I came back, I think I've told you this, but the first time I came back from Egypt, the first play I saw was *An Evening with an Immigrant* when it was at Soho and just simply seeing that was part of me feeling like, oh, there is a home for me here still in this country. And weirdly that's in some ways what his play was about, but the story that he tells about his relationship with you and how that work was made and how that related to him applying for his passport and residency and all of that – those are values, those are real values.

Representation

Khalid is talking about trust here, specifically of a trust born of witnessing me, and Fuel, living our values in our programme, and in our practice, and specifically of how representation – another of Fuel's core values – manifests in our work. This is a value I was brought up with and comes hand in hand with a deep-rooted sense of justice which burns in me as brightly now as it did when I was a child. My understanding continues to develop and I have much more to learn. But in terms of how this value resonates in Fuel's work, we say:

> Performance is representation and we believe the people who make it and experience it should be representative of the diversity of the world we live in. We seek to break down barriers and enable everyone to participate freely in cultural life.

This last phrase consciously echoes the Rome Charter of 2020 which states: "The Right to Participate Fully and Freely in Cultural Life is vital to our Cities and Communities". This reference is about consciously situating our approach to representation in human rights frame. For me, equitable representation is not purely motivated by "the Creative Case for Diversity" (ACE, 2011) although of course there absolutely is one – this is about fundamental human rights. As Anthony puts it:

> I will fight tooth and nail to make sure that everything I'm part of is as representative as possible. And that can be, you know, building a youth board at the Barbican or creating a youth opera company at the Royal Opera House, or the Travis project or the range of projects that Fuel has done.

The visceral language of "fight tooth and nail" conveys Anthony's strength of conviction, a sense of right and wrong, or striving for justice, which we share. I believe this is one of the reasons why in Fuel he found a professional home which shares his values, and in me, a collaborator who he trusts. As a cis het non-disabled middle-class white woman, I am clear that I need to acknowledge my privileges, as well as where I do and do not have lived experience. Since researching Speakeasy, my understanding (through study and practice) of dramaturgy has been impacted considerably by considering the implications of post-colonial approaches, and I've questioned whether or when it is my place to offer feedback, as well as whether my perspective would be helpful or unhelpful, in each process I have produced. I believe that some of the crucial and innovative work we are iteratively experimenting with within anti-racist and anti-ableist producing strategies can usefully enrich, disturb and agitate against assumptive processes within collaboration. There is much more thinking and work which I hope to do in this space, and this work needs time, care and many other voices than my own.

Without doubt, there is much more to learn, and much more work to do. There is no question in my mind that these extraordinary producers who I have worked with and interviewed, and many others besides, have the potential to create significant and lasting change for our cultural landscape and the wider social and political culture we live in. But to unleash this potential, what do producers need?

According to the producers I interviewed access to resources – and explicitly to money – is the key challenge:

> I think the biggest challenge as a freelance producer right now is money.
> (Kate Scanlan)

> I think the most difficult thing for me as a producer at the moment is the financials. Trying to get our projects to stack up financially feels really difficult. I feel like it was already very difficult and now it's harder.
>
> (Kathryn Bilyard)

One reason for this might lie in what Louise Blackwell describes as her biggest challenge:

> The biggest challenge I have is how to embed creativity and arts in our everyday society. I have to fight for the value of arts and culture. And I don't feel like I've had to do that really as much in my career until now. So that has changed. That is something I wasn't quite expecting. I think that's to do with political context. I think it's to do with the cost of living. I think it's to do with the fact that the pressures on people and on decision makers are, are extreme. There's still not an understanding of how arts and culture can solve some things and can change some things and can make things better.

If we can – collectively – make the case for more investment (from many directions) in the arts, perhaps the potential of these powerhouse producers can be unleashed – but there is no doubt that the political and economic context can make that argument harder to land. However, as Louise says, we have solutions and contributions to make and now producers are part of making that case.

We need to take care though, as producer Hannah Smith (and others I spoke to) directly link the current economic challenges and lack of resource with producer burnout:

> For me the biggest challenge is lack of resource all over the industry which ultimately leads to producer burnout, as the responsibility for ever-increasing budgets and decreasing income ultimately lies with us.

If we want producers not to burn out, and not to leave the industry, we need to take note of Sarah Wilson-White's words here:

> The risk facing producers is similar to that of other skilled professionals in the sector - it's how to sustain a practice after the first ten years when wages are stagnant and working practices still ask for too much for too little.

The talent drain kickstarted by the pandemic is documented elsewhere and producers are not immune to this effect. As a Trustee of the Clore Leadership Programme, one of my ongoing concerns at present is the impact of current political and economic pressures on the leadership of the arts and cultural sector: as well as "holding" artists, producers tend to "hold" the responsibility for making budgets stack up, and as Hannah outlines so succinctly, costs are increasing apace and income (earned, raised or statutory) is not.

And if we do succeed in generating the resource, in making things happen, in producing change, what then? Anthony Gray has this to say:

> Producers hold a lot of power. If you are from a lived experience where you are quite fortunate, and that could be for a range of different reasons – you could be able-bodied, you could be white, you could be earning a good amount of money or from a good background, then you have got to leave that door open. Not even leave it open. You've got prop it open and you've got to get ladders up there. And you have to be pulling people through in a really safe way, to make sure that our sector is as diverse and brilliant as possible. And then if you are from the global majority, you're Black, you're Asian, or you are from the LGBTQ+ family, or you are disabled, you are a woman, you are a single mum, then I would say don't be fearful. Know that your presence in this sector is what is going to drive this sector forward.

A big focus of my work as a producer, which I aim to extend both in my practice and in future research, centres around exactly this: how to prop open gates not to keep them; to provide safe ladders, to offer boundaries not inflict borders; to do what I can to ensure our sector is as diverse and brilliant as possible. This is a vital part of producing change.

What next?

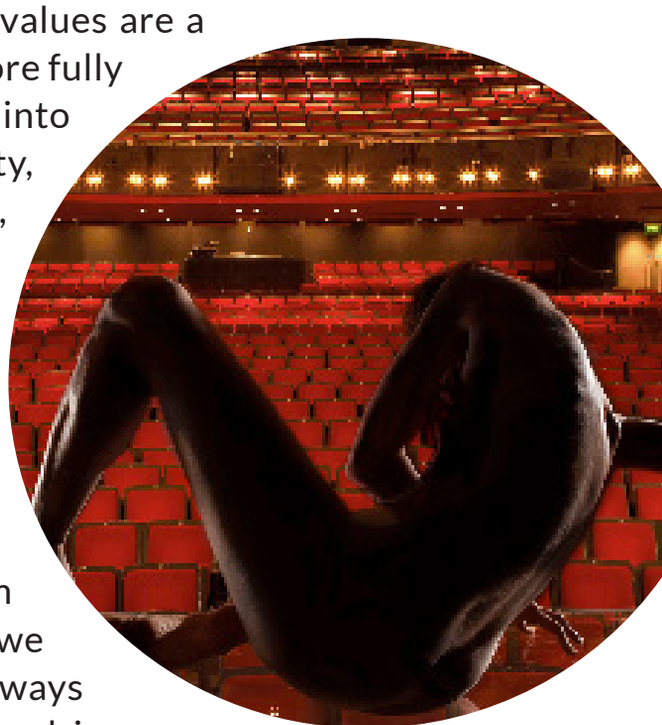
So what is emerging from this enquiry and where might it lead next?

That a good producer needs to be a transformative superhero in temperament, with an ability to embody lots of seeming opposites e.g. to be reactive/proactive, visible/invisible, firm/flexible – and that this role can be both exhilarating and exhausting. In future research, I hope to dig even deeper into the language(s) of producing as a way to understand the challenges and needs of producers more profoundly, and what new ways of describing this role and

articulating what conditions or environments might unleash its potential further.

That the producer role has grown in number, visibility and diversity over the last 20 years – because of an increase in both opportunity and need for this role, caused by the political and economic context across the arts, the UK more broadly and global political and economic shifts – and equally that this growth is now threatened by our current economic and political context. I'm keen to dig deeper into what part gender plays in producing, and age, and class, and into articulating strategies and methodologies for anti-racist and ant-ableist producing, and into the complexities of intersectionality and producing.

That in order to navigate this terrain the producer can really benefit from a clear set of values* according to which they can build relationships and make decisions in order to make things happen. Having begun to explore trust, collaboration, creativity and representation in this research, how can I take those beginnings further, and if my values are a constellation can I understand the skyscape more fully by deep diving not only into those values but into other personal values like curiosity, sustainability, care, and justice. My supervisor, Molly McPhee, explained to me how in a library search, using the asterisk broadens the search out to include an infinity of suffixes or prefixes, and how the ontology and function of the asterisk has been really important to queer cultural theory, for example with Trans* describing the way in which Trans contains many identities and by its being, creates many identities. I'm interested in exploring what might happen if we think of the terminology "values*" in similar ways – what does it mean to be values-led or values-driven as an individual or as an organisation? Perhaps the asterisk can help us articulate the interconnectedness of our values which exist in relationship with each other, and/or the ever-evolving definition of those values for us as we develop our own understandings and language(s) and as our context changes us and the language(s) we use.



I've focused my research here very deliberately on producers – and artists – with whom I have close working relationships – to dig deeper into the intersection in the Venn diagram of our shared experience and understanding. I'd love also to throw those shared assumptions into relief by talking to producers with different methodological and/or ethical approaches, who understand their role using different language(s).

I'd also love to find ways to engage with audiences more in this research, which will take different skills and processes, not least because of the aforementioned invisibility of the role of the producer.

Of course, producers don't just need an adaptable temperament and values. They need many other things which might include a clear vision, skills and expertise, knowledge and networks, access to resources. There is much more to understand on all of that too. For producers like me, in the middle (I'd like to say prime…) of our professional lives, there are very real practical and economic challenges in how we can succeed in making things happen. It's one thing to research – and a hugely useful process – but for now at least, it's back to my day job: collaborating with brave and brilliant artists with care and creativity, seeking to make a tangible contribution to embedding the arts in everyday life and to making a case for that in all the contexts in which I advocate and agitate, and sharing what power I have with people who will be the future of our sector. This combination of challenges and opportunities is what producing is for me, and in different ways for my courageous colleagues.

And, as they say, not all superheroes wear capes.